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ABSTRACT

Many of the best nonfiction writers violate punctuation rules frequently enough to indicate that the rules neither tell very well what to do nor inform very accurately about what is done. An examination of 18 prominent authors' use of the entire hierarchy of punctuation marks shows disagreement and inconsistency among the writers concerning application of rules. Analysis of the writers' works: (1) explains the differences among skilled writers as reasoned principle-based behavior; (2) produces a set of four principles that guide punctuation use; and (3) suggests that punctuation usage should be guided by principles of style, rather than rules that demand strict compliance. Teachers should encourage students to think of punctuation not as a matter of right and wrong, but in terms of stylistic concerns. Punctuation usage should be considered in terms of clarity, appropriateness, effectiveness, and taste. The "principle" approach is positive, while the "rule" approach is negative. In addition, the rule approach is intimidating for students, while the principle approach is easier to learn and less threatening. (Two tables, 122 examples, and 10 endnotes are included.) (SG)

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# RETHINKING PUNCTUATION

## 1.0 The Problem

1.1 Introduction. This paper identifies a problem and proposes a solution. The problem is that a great many of our best writers of nonfiction violate the punctuation rules in our handbooks and style manuals frequently enough [1] to indicate that the rules fail on two basic counts: They neither tell us what to do very well nor inform us about what is done very accurately; that is, they fail prescriptively and descriptively. I am referring to functional punctuation, of course, the marks used to set off certain constituents of written sentences. I first consider four comma rules, two telling us when to use the comma and two telling us when not to use it; the discussion then evolves into a systematic treatment of the entire hierarchy of marks (zero to period).

About these four rules, writers not only seem to disagree (Updike, at least in his nonfiction, typically conforms to the rules and Orwell often enough does not), they seem to be inconsistent (on three pages, 58-61, Eisley follows the coordinate clause rule seven times and violates it seven times), and self contradictory (E.B. White often

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enough rejects the advice in Strunk and White); in addition, British writers are less bound by the rules than are American writers. [2]

In recognition of such discrepancies, the better handbooks often note exceptions to the rules ("If two clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction are very short, you may omit the comma." The Holt Handbook), but such general qualifications neither account for the facts nor help uncertain writers. Meyer's rules and principles provide more insight, but they cannot be said to make punctuation easier for students; and more important, I argue, they do not characterize what "real" writers really do. Most good writers, even if they know some grammar--especially if they know some grammar--dismiss the rules of handbooks and style manuals as generally irrelevant; these writers use punctuation as well as words and syntax to craft their meaning--that is, they use it rhetorically.. In fact, even though conventional handbook rules are hardly simple, they still oversimplify the demands that sentences make on punctuation marks; they may, for example, be adequate for representing the expository content found in machine translation but not for revealing the textual tensions of a thoughtful essayist.

The solution proposed here is a theory of what does happen when good writers punctuate; and, as theory, it has two principle virtues: First, it explains the differences found in the texts as intentional and principle governed,

unlike Meyer's system, which sees differences from rules as "violations" of rules and/or principles (chapter five); second, the theory is simple, which is desirable pedagogically (we'd like it to work in the instructional setting) and desirable psychologically (we'd like it to account for the fact that writers readily learn to punctuate when, without formal instruction, they read and write).

1.2 The Evidence. The evidence comes from essays by contemporaries (see Table 1) who are admired for their writing--essays that we call "literature," that we elevate as models for students, that for the most part we include in college readers. Though unscientifically determined, this corpus is considered more representative than either Summey's or Meyer's [3] because the literary essayist is her or his own editor; as a matter of principle most, if not all, of them insist upon their own style over the regularizings of a copy editor.

Generic differences also account for significant punctuation differences, for obviously punctuation differences are to be found between prose fiction and prose nonfiction; and study will likely show that that there are even punctuation differences between some nonfiction genres, between the report and the memoir, the memoir and the how-to essay, for example. Studies of current practices should be based on such differences, identifying the practices found in one genre before attempting to generalize about two or more.[4]

Table 1

Abbey, Edward. Desert Solitaire. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.

Baker, Russell. "Marriage a la Mode." Klaus, Anderson, and Faery, 50-52.

Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village." Klaus, Anderson, and Faery, 66-75.

_____ "A Fly in the Buttermilk." Klaus, Anderson, and Faery, 77-84.

Didion, Joan. "John Wayne: A Love Story." Klaus, Anderson, and Faery, 149-155.

_____ The White Album. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Dillard, Annie. Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

Eiseley, Loren. All the Strange Hours. New York: Charales Scribner's Sons, 1975.

Epstein, Joseph. Familiar Territory. New York: Oxford U Press, 1979.

Forster, E. M. Abinger Harvest. New York: Meridian Books, 1955.

Hoagland, Edward. "The Problem of the Golden Rule." Klaus, Anderson, and Faery, 352-360.

Klaus, Carl H., Chris Anderson, and Rebecca Blevins Faery. In Depth: Essayists for Our Time. New York: Harcourt, 1990.

Mencken, H.L. Prejudices--A Selection. New York: Vintage

Books, 1955.

Murray, Donald. The Craft of Revision. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991.

Orwell, George. The Orwell Reader. New York: Harcourt, 1956.

Updike, John. Hugging the Shore. New York: Knopf, 1983.

Walker, Alice. Living by the Word. New York: Harcourt, 1988.

Waugh, Evelyn. The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh. London: Methuen, 1984.

White, E.B. The Essays of E.B. White. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Woolf, Virginia. Colected Essays, vol. II. New York: Harcourt, 1967.

1.3 Examples. The following rule "violations" are typically noted as faults by handbooks, style manuals, and composition teachers:

(1) When one considers the history of the Negro in America it is of the greatest importance to recognize that the naive beliefs of a person .... (Baldwin)

(2 When I looked again at the tree the leaves had reassembled as if nothing had happened. (Dillard)

(3) When I turned back the lock had vanished. (Eisley)

(4) If we are to remember Cardan today let us not remember him as an oddity. (Forster)

(5) If you cannot taste the difference it is not worth your while ever talking or thinking about wine again. (Waugh)

(6) When a man is in the South he must do as the Southerners do; but although I am willing to call my wife "sugar" I am not willing to call a colored person "nigger." (White)

The rule violation in these examples is much emphasized in our handbooks and style manuals: "Use a comma to set off most introductory elements..." The Little, Brown Handbook tells us, referring to words, phrases, and especially clauses. In fact, most contemporary writers of nonfiction frequently disregard this rule.

The next set of sentences represents another common rule violation:

(7) Please state your message at the sound of the beep and my machine will process your call. (Baker)

(8) Tell me whether you think a good joke can be made about the subject of free enterprise or of public welfare and I will tell you a good deal about what your politics are. (Epstein)

(9) We have wiped tigers off the earth and yet our children hear as much about the symbolism of tigers as children did in the old days. (Hoagland)

(10) I may have to use complex words if I am writing about a complex subject but I will still use the simplest word I can find. (Murray)

(11) She is very black and her neck is stiff and her countenance has been softened by the blows. (Walker)

For this sentence type the Harbrace College Handbook tells us to "(u)se a comma before and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet when they link main clauses." This violation is common enough to dispel any notion that it results from indifference or a slip of attention. Notice, moreover, that among the writers are Donald Murray (an honored teacher of writing), Joseph Epstein (a most conservative punctuator, as befits the editor of The American Scholar), and Russell Baker (whose practice is presumably subject to the conservative practices of The New York Times).

And the corollary of this independent clause rule is regularly violated by most, if not all, good essayists. The Bedford Handbook for Writers advises: "Do not use a comma between compound elements that are not independent clauses." And here is what good writers frequently do:

(12) I had a machine that not only answered for me, but also made calls for me. (Baker)

(13) This was, the neurologist said, an exclusionary diagnosis, and meant nothing. (Didion)

(14) The coffee is strong and full of chicory, and good. (White)

(15) Here was an opponent that more than once puzzled Roosevelt, and in the end flatly dismayed him. (Mencken)

(16) Till the age of fourteen I believed in God, and believed that the accounts given of him were true. (Orwell)

17) In 1919, he met Milena Jesenska-Pollak, and broke with

her in 1923. (Updike)

Nor should we forget the comma splice, so evident a mark of flawed technique to the teacher of composition, yet so common a device among good writers:

(18) No one cut him, in fact no one touched him. (Baldwin)

(19) I washed before the mirror in a daze, my twisted summer sleep still hung about me like sea kelp. (Dillard)

(20) "Car coat," "hot pants," "hipsterism," "hippiedom," "rap session," "sensitivity training, " teenie bopper"--those were the days, my friend, thank God they're at an end. (Epstein)

(21) He could not stand the insincerities that are customary between officials, he refused to make use of the face-saving apparatus that they so liberally provide and employ. (Forster)

(22) And jargon gets sloppy, the same word means one thing to a clinical psychologist, quite another to an experimental psychologist. (Murray)

(23) To the first four of his children he was one kind of father, to the second set of four he was another kind. (Walker)

If the evidence of rule violations is adequate, these basic rules fail as descriptive statements of what good nonfiction writers are doing; moreover, if the rules are so lightly regarded by writers, they also fail prescriptively. We will be better off, surely, with an approach that accounts for what good writers really do.

## 2.0 How Good Writers Punctuate

**2.1 Introduction.** The topic is punctuation--how it is used to mark written discourse--and there are two fundamental assumptions. It is assumed that meaning in discourse is found in the sequence of independent clauses, complete and incomplete. (An "incomplete" independent clause contains grammatical deletion of the subject or finite verb, the full clause being recoverable by the reader.) I do not use the term "sentence"; a text consists of clauses, and a sentence is simply the form that a clause takes when it is marked with an initial capital letter and a sentence-final punctuation mark. It is also assumed that the writer uses punctuation to help readers perceive in the text what the writer wants readers to perceive--the meaning; but it is assumed further that a good writer punctuates not only to achieve clarity (After Paula left, Jim called Audrey) but to achieve rhetorical effectiveness as well (Someone brought crackers, cheese--and beer).

The marks to be considered are period, semicolon, colon, dash, comma, and "zero," a range of marks forming a natural hierarchy. The period is, of course, only one of three sentence-final marks:

(24) Sam bought a car.

(25) Sam bought a car?

(26) Sam bought a car!

As important as any other mark in the hierarchy is zero

(no mark), which signifies minimal separation (syntactic connection) between words within a larger unit, as in (24)-(26) and the following:

(27) Sam and Julie liked his car.

(28) Sam liked and hated his car.

Or to suggest minimal separation between a clause and incomplete clause:

(29) Sam bought a car and hated it.

And as we have seen, zero occurs between complete clauses too:

(30) Sam bought a car and Julie hated it.

Sentences (24)-(26) illustrate an obligatory zero because of the subject-verb grammatical tie (which might be stated as a "rule") but (27-30) illustrate options for using a mark higher in the hierarchy than zero (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Punctuation Hierarchy

period (maximum separation), as in I looked up. And there she stood.

semicolon (medium separation), as in I looked up; and there she stood.

colon (medium separation, anticipatory), as in I looked up: And there she stood.

dash (medium separation, emphatic), as in I looked up--and there she stood.

comma (minimum separation), as in I looked up, and there

she stood. zero (no separation, i.e., connection), as in I looked up and there she stood.

The higher the mark, the greater the separation--the greater the independence given to the marked off element. Notice, however, that three marks below the period are each labeled "medium separation" because there does not appear to be a regularly discernible difference between any two of the three in degree of separation. [6]

The term "separation" refers primarily to a logical (semantic) separation between syntactic elements (between dependent and independent elements or between two "equal" elements); by marking off these elements (separating them), a writer clarifies or emphasizes what needs emphasizing.

Parentheses are a different matter. Their uses suggest that they may not properly be punctuation marks at all. The punctuation system has been devised to mark separations between related elements within or between clauses. Parentheses, on the other hand, mark a portion of text for exclusion; their function is not to mark syntactic separation. Consider two facts:

1) Parentheses are necessarily used as enclosing pairs, whereas the dash and comma can function singly to separate.
2) Although they may enclose both ends of a separable element within an orthographic sentence (in which case they may be interchangeable with paired dashes),


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> parentheses frequently enclose both ends of a complete sentence or set of sentences or even complete paragraph. The entire portion of the resulting enclosure is thus placed in a subservient role to the main text. Parentheses therefore mark content, not syntax.

Parentheses obviously belong in a complete discussion of punctuation, for they do have a marking function; but their unique uses suggest that they are at most a peripheral part of the functional system that is used for marking the syntactic-grammatical-logical relationships within orthographic sentences.

Concerning functional punctuation, then, clausal meaning is the unit to be made clear by punctuation, and there are necessarily two subtopics to be considered--punctuating within the clause and punctuating between clauses.

2.2 Punctuating within the Clause. There are three possibilities for punctuating within the boundaries of the single clause--marking off a pre-clause element, a mid-clause element, or a post-clause element. [7] We punctuate at these points in an indedpendent clause because of the stated assumptions: A writer uses punctuation to make clear and/or effective the relationships between an independent clause and any attached elements. This is a use that can be stated as a principle (only two principles are needed and they are unordered):

Principle: Punctuate to help achieve clarity and/or

rhetorical effect when relating attached elements to an independent clause and when relating one clause to another.

This principle requires a writer to make judgments about when "help" is needed. So there is reason for differences among writers--judgments will differ when it comes to taste and rhetorical needs. The following sentences illustrate different judgments when punctuating within the boundaries of a single independent clause:

(30) If they should see a natural orange they might think something had gone wrong with it. (White)

(31) Because she is a lover of sweet corn, the economic status of my raccoon is precarious. (White)

(32) Well--the sun will be up in a few minutes and I haven't even begun to make coffee. (Abbey)

(33) Further: They refused to send their children to school, fearing drugs and an introduction into the sickness of American life. (Walker)

(34) The fact no doubt explains the lack of charm that one finds in his town. (Mencken)

(35) The official doctrine, in this as in other departments, is obviously quite unsound. (Mencken)

(36) Ever since the days of Lowell--even since the days of Cooper--there have been denunciations of it. (Mencken)

(37) My book was lost, with the signatures. (Eiseley)

(38) We were, both of us, merely the debris life always

leaves in its passing, like the maimed discarded chicks in the hatchery trays--no more than that. (Eisley)

(39) On the night of Jackson's speech, I felt it for him; along with the grief that in neither of our lifetimes is the United States likely to choose the best leadership offered to it. (Walker)

(40) They are all bred beef: beef heart, beef hide, beef hocks. (Dillard)

(41) They make us feel we could be artists. Whereas the game, when it becomes real, becomes disquieting. (Forster)

Evidence like (31)-(41) suggests that two rules control the availability of marks for use with pre- and mid-clause attachments:

Rule 1. Do not use a period or semicolon to separate a pre-clause attachment.

Rule 2. To separate mid-clause attachments, use pairs of commas or dashes --or no marks at all.

Handbooks and style manuals tell readers to analyze sentences grammatically and apply a rule accordingly, but many good writers, like many students, can't analyze the grammar of their sentences any better than they can the chemistry of their breakfast cereal. This paper suggests that what they really do is really different: They quite naturally learn--and students might also--to analyze their sentences as having major and minor boundaries, and when it helps achieve clarity and/or rhetorical effect, they use the

comma (or a mark higher in the hierarchy) to mark a boundary.

And because every context is different, a writer's judgment may seem to differ from sentence to sentence, as in (30)-(41). The fact does not mean that the writer is inconsistent; it means that no rule or set of rules can simply and adequately either describe the choices that good writers have made or adequately prescribe specific choices to make (a conclusion that will become even more convincing after considering punctuation between clauses). Instead of a rule or set of rules, we need a principle or set of principles that accounts for the differences among skilled writers as reasoned principle-based behavior.

It might be well here to point out that the first principle covers a number of rules found in handbooks, rules for punctuating adverbials (word, phrase, or clause), sentence modifiers, restrictives and nonrestrictives, series, parenthetical elements, transitional elements, appositions, and absolutes, as in (30)-(41) and (42)-(44):

(42) Charlie Latrine, the narrator and hero of Saul Bellow's new novel, takes a lot of abuse from the other characters. His brother Julius tells him.... (Updike)

(43) The engine sputters, gasps, catches fire, gains momentum, winds up into a roar, valves popping, rockers thumping, pistons hissing up and down inside their oiled jackets. (Abbey)

(44) If Palinurus believed, as he plainly does not, in an all-wise God who has a particular task for each

individual soul, which the individual is free to accept or decline at will, and whose ultimate destiny is determined by his response to God's vocation, then his demand would be wholly intelligible. (Waugh)

To punctuate well one needs to know--not book grammar--only an independent clause and its attachments when one writes them (a knowledge that is essentially intuitive, psycholinguistics tells us) and to consider, for the reader's sake, the need to clarify and/or emphasize these relationships. Indeed, one claim for this theory is that anyone--writer or student--will punctuate more effectively and efficiently because of a concern for meaning rather than a concern for rules.

The effect of the first principle is to give emphasis (and a degree of independence) to the marked-off element. The principle therefore provides the writer with an option for separating words or phrases or dependent clauses that would not otherwise be separated; it becomes a rhetorical technique, a way to give a dependent element a degree of independence--an emphasis. Examples of this use of the principle are not unusual among sophisticated writers:

(45) White men and women continued to run things, badly. (Walker)

(46) "He comes down, uninvited, but I ask him over anyway." (Didion)

(47) You can certainly learn to spell "moccasin" while driving into Maine, and there is little else to do,

except steer and avoid death. (White)

(48) This morning it was a wood duck, down at the creek. (Dillard)

2.3 Punctuating Multiple Independent Clauses. Where independent clauses come together there is a major boundary (major relative to a minor boundary like that between an adverbial and a clause); and there are times when it is helpful to signal the major boundary with a mark higher in the hierarchy than the mark used for a minor boundary. Still another punctuation situation to be discussed develops when a coordinate conjunction is used at a major boundary.

Consider, first, the joining of two independent clauses without coordinators. The usual mark between "complete thoughts" is, of course, the period:

(49) I do not remember when he started to cough. Perhaps it was unnoticeable at first. (Walker)

But a look through the essays readily reveals other marks between clauses:

(50) Quite half your friends are here; by far the more promising half are all behaving in ways that would be a revelation to you. (Waugh)

(51) Every 100% American, contemplating Dr. Coolidge, is psychicallly bound to admire him: The alternative is anarchy. (Mencken)

(52) As for my politics, you will have guessed that I am not a Fascist--Fascism does evil that evil may come.

(Forster)

(53) The great days have faded, the end is in sight. (White)

The one unacceptable mark between uncoordinated independent clauses is zero (which can be stated as a rule), but notice in (49)-(53) that any of the other hierarchical marks is possible. A writer chooses one over another because of semantic differences and concern for readers, but all are frequently possible, even in semantic terms. Here is (49), which had a period, punctuated with the other possibilities:

(54A) I do not remember when he started to cough; perhaps it was unnoticeable at first.

(54B) I do not remember when he started to cough: Perhaps it was unnoticeable at first.

(54C) I do not remember when he started to cough--perhaps it was unnoticeable at first.

(54D) I do not remember when he started to cough, perhaps it was unnoticeable at first.

For further evidence of available options, the reader should try each of the other marks between pairs of independent clauses; if the clauses are coherent and readily punctuated with a semicolon, they will take, in a surprising number of cases, even a colon. At any rate, the point is this: The different marks produce different"meanings"--different connections, different emphases, different impacts; they enable a writer to achieve subtleties otherwise unavailable.

All of which suggests, strongly, that punctuation is a "creative" skill--as specified by the hierarchical range of options. Some of the possibilities for generating meaning can be best illustrated by examining some of the options chosen by good writers. First, two clauses by Didion:

(55A) I agreed passionately. I disagreed passionately.

(55B) I agreed passionately; I disagreed passionately.

(55C) I agreed passionately--I disagreed passionately.

(55D) I agreed passionately, I disagreed passionately.

Didion chose (55A), but do not the others create interesting differences? The next example is a sentence by Hoagland:

(56A) So while they could scarcely contain their frustration, my face displayed bewilderment. I kept pretending to grope to understand.

(56B) So while they could scarcely contain their frustration, my face displayed bewilderment; I kept pretending to grope to understand.

(56C) So while they could scarcely contain their frustration, my face displayed bewilderment: I kept pretending to grope to understand.

(56D) So while they could scarcely contain their frustration, my face displayed bewilderment--I kept pretending to grope to understand.

(56E) So while they could scarcely contain their frustration, my face displayed bewilderment, I kept pretending to grope for understand.

In (56) only the comma is not a good choice: meaning is more clear when the major and minor boundaries are differently marked--Hoagland chose the semicolon. And last a sentence by Murray:

(57A) I now know I was right. We write with phrases, those small units of language in which words collide and give off a meaning that is different than either word alone.

(57B) I now know I was right; we write with phrases, those small units of language in which words collide and give off a meaning that is different than either word alone.

(57C) I now know I was right: We write in phrases, those small units of language in which words collide and give off a meaning that is different than either word alone.

(57D) I now know I was right--we write in phrases, those small units of language in which words collide and give off a meaning that is different than either word alone.

(57E) I now know I was right, we write in phrases, those small units of language in which words collide and give off a meaning that is different than either word alone.

Because all of the marks seem so reasonable in (57), not many will guess that Murray chose the comma. It seems, not incidentally, that the colon is a particularly good choice. Indeed, for purists like most of us English teachers, a comma

is the worst choice. But is Murray wrong? Or is it a matter of taste? Or a subtle semantic difference?

At this point we need a basis for choosing among the marks in the hierarchy, and an obvious principle suggests itself (based, as always, on the assumption that we punctuate to make our meaning clear and/or effective):

> Principle: Use the relative differences among the hierarchical marks to show the degree and nature of the separation--the higher the mark the greater the separation.

As the principle states, the hierarchy is used to indicate degree of separation--of emphasis, of independence; it is a separation that marks a logical and semantic structure of the sentence. Consider this example by Abbey:

(58) This morning I arise before sunrise, stick my head out of the sack, peer through a frosty window at a scene dim and vague with flowing mists, dark fantastic shapes looming beyond. An unlikely landscape.

Abbey might have avoided the fragment with a comma (not much emphasis) or a colon (too formal?) or a dash (nice emphasis), but he got even more emphasis with a period (the major separator in the hierarchy). The next sentence offers similar possibilities, so what would you propose--off hand--to fill the space?

(59) And after a year and a half more of struggle it emerged

triumphant a knightly victor surely!

Mencken might have used a comma, certainly a dash or a colon, even a semicolon, or--like many in our more modern day--a period. He chose a dash, but other possibilities demonstrate the options that writers have and illustrate the differences among the hierarchy of marks.

2.4 Overloading and the Hierarchy. The hierarchical system functions automatically--or should--when a sentence has what might be called an overloading of commas. In a series having internal commas, for example, the major boundary is punctuated by a mark higher in the scale. (Note that this automatic function is stated as a rule in most handbooks.) To illustrate: if Forster had used only "that" clauses without internal punctuation in the following, he would have needed only commas, like this:

(60) We read that the Franks built it in the thirteenth century and called it Misithras or Mistia, that it became the chief fortress in the Peloponnese during an uninteresting period, that it was governed by a long succession of tyrants whose lives were short and brutal.

But the clause omitted from (60) had an internal mark (a minor boundary), automatically raising the separation between each item in the series to a major boundary--thus requiring a semicolon:

(61) We read that the Franks built it in the thirteenth century and called it Misithras or Mistia; that it became the chief fortress in the Peloponnese during an

uninteressting period; that it was taken from the Franks by the Byzantines, and from the Byzantines by the Turks; that it was governed by a long succession of tyrants whose lives were short and brutal.

When the series has an appositional function, comma overloading prompts dashes to separate the series from the major syntactic element. If the apposition is a single item, commas are normally used:

(62) I stopped riding the Lexington Avenue IRT because I noticed for the first time that the stranger I had studied, the spinster who read the classified pages every day, looked older than she once had.

But the sentence that Didion wrote had a series of three items, and therefore dashes at the major boundaries:

(63) I stopped riding the Lexington Avenue IRT because I noticed for the first time that all the strangers I had seen for years--the man with the seeing eye dog, the spinster who read the classified pages everyday, the fat girl who always got off with me at Grand Central--looked older than they once had.

There is nothing in (62) and (63) that differs from the rules in handbooks, but the hierarchical scale and the two principles provide a more systematic explanation.

The other use of paired dashes simply supports the general theory being presented here: Dashes provide more emphasis--and sometimes more clarity--than paired commas:

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(64A) A convenient summary of the evils of television not long ago appeared in Esquire, that force for good in American life, in an article by the journalist Richard Reeves ....

(64B) A convenient summary of the evils of television not long ago appeared in Esquire --that force for good in American life--in an article by the journalist Richard Reeves ....

Epstein decided on emphasis here--and chose the dashes.

2.5 Coordinators and the Hierarchy. Coordinators are an important topic in a discussion of punctuation because they alone (among the conjunctions) connect independent clauses and thereby change the nature of the separation between clauses. With a coordinator, zero is possible; with a coordinator, ellipsis in the second clause is possible (called here an "incomplete clause"); and with a coordinator, there develops a new dimension in the hierarchy of marks.

Because meaning in connected discourse is carried by sequences of independent clauses, the only conjunction affecting punctuation practice is the coordinate conjunction and its related types. (All other conjunctions relate structures that are punctuated according to the principle for marking off pre-, mid-, and post-clause attachments.)

Quirk et. al. identify only three "pure" coordinators--and, or, but (p. 552); however, when punctuating to make meaning clear, the writer may well perceive other

conjunctions as functioning in essentially the same way. Thus the discussion of and, but, and or that follows is applicable for for, so, yet, nor, then, the correlatives, and perhaps a few others. [8]

The basic semantic sense of and is "addition":

(65) At the SPCA were dogs and cats and kids.

(66) Jack went into the mall and up the escalator.

(67) Jack went into the mall and Jill waited in the car.

Although punctuation separates and coordinators appear to join, they both fulfill the required function of marking a relationship between items. The following (though found in experimental writing) are not acceptable:

(68) At the SPCA were dogs cats kids.

(69) Jack went into the mall up the escalator.

(70) Jack went into the mall Jill waited in the car.

Although their meaning is "additive" (or some variation thereof ), coordinators do mark a separation between elements, evidenced by the fact that each one has a potentially independent grammatical rlationship with the other sentence elements, as in (70) for example:

(71) At the SPCA were dogs.

(72) At the SPCA were cats.

(73) At the SPCA were kids.

And without and, we mark the relationship with a comma:

(74) At the SPCA were dogs, cats, kids.

So and and the punctuation marks have different but related functions. The comma emphasizes a separation between

elements, an independence of each element; and emphasizes a joining or compounding of elements without obscuring their separateness, their independence. Consider (75A)-(75C):

(75A) I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, rumple, fall.

(75B I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck and rumple and fall.

The intonation difference between (75A) and (75B) corresponds with the punctuation difference: (75A) emphasizes the separateness and (75B) emphasizes the connection; the separated elements in (75A) have more emphasis, more independence. But notice what happens when a writer combines and with the comma:

(75C) I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall.

The separated elements in (75C) have gained even more independence than they had in (75A); it is as if each one is an additional thought beginning with and , and each one, as a thought, gains clausal importance. (Sentence (75C) is Dillard's; she has punctuated according to her "meaning," not according to a rule in a handbook.)

So a punctuation mark and a coordinator together appear to produce additional emphasis. Consider now some more evidence involving words, phrases, and clauses. The next example is from Mencken, who punctuated as in (76B):

(76A) The hell of dead gods is as crowded as the Presbyterian hell for babies. Damana is there and Esus and

Drunemeton and Silvena ....

(77B) The hell of dead gods is as crowded as the Presbyterian hell for babies. Damana is there, and Esus, and Drunemeton, and Silvena .... (Mencken)

Next a sentence by Didion:

(78A) They asked it in New York and Los Angeles and they asked it in Boston and Washington and they asked it in Dallas and Houston and Chicago and San Francisco.

(78B) They asked it in New York and Los Angeles and they asked it in Boston and Washington and they asked it in Dallas, and Houston, and Chicago, and San Francisco.

Didion punctuated as in (78A), apparently wanting the accumulating effect, not the separating effect. The next example is also from Didion:

(79A) If I had a center I would have monkeys and Chinese restaurants and Mylar kites and bands of small girls playing tambourines.

(79B) If I had a center I would have monkeys, and Chinese restaurants, and Mylar kites, and bands of small girls playing tambourines.

Here Didion punctuated as in (79B), presumably to give independence (emphasis) to the separate items.

The difference in emphasis can be had when punctuating between clauses too (I refrain from adding "of course"):

(80A) He took it silently but I could see something had gone from our relationship.

(80B) He took it silently, but I could see something had gone from our relationship.

Eisley used no punctuation here, emphasizing the joining of the thoughts, not their independence.

The hierarchical relationships between the marks are evident with coordinators too. Consider the degrees of separation with a sentence from Forster:

(81A) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts. But it must be left to experts.

(81B) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts; but it must be left to experts.

(81C) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts: But it must be left to experts.

(81D) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts--but it must be left to experts.

(81E) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts, but it must be left to experts.

(81F) Much more must be said about the Sedition Acts but it must be left to experts.

Here Forster chose the more predictable comma, but had he wanted more emphasis he would have chosen a mark higher in the hierarchy.

Similar options are available with phrases (in spite of what handbooks lead one to believe):

(82A) It is in large the complete expression of a man's soul. And a great soul.

(82B) It is in large the complete expression of a man's soul;



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and a great soul.

(82C) It is in large the complete expression of a man's soul: And a great soul.

(82D) It is in large the complete expression of a man's soul--and a great soul.

(82E) It is in large the complete expression of a man's soul, and a great soul.

Waugh used a dash here, clearly a better choice than the comma. But is it better than a colon or period? Is the difference a matter of taste? A matter of meaning?

2.6 Increasing the Options. Previous examples have illustrated options one has when combining independent clauses, but more are available. One can use an appropriate coordinator alone, or any punctuation except zero alone, or a coordinator plus punctuation--and one can, by choosing appropriately, control the emphasis while indicating the semantic nature of the relationship.

And the options increase in number when the second clause is "incomplete" (has an ellipted subject or verb or both). Examples (83 A-E) illustrate options available when limiting ourselves to the author's exact words, and (83 F-P) illustrate additional options actually available:

(83A) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows. The nicest building in Nine Miles.

(83B) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass

windows; the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(83C) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows: the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(83D) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows--the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(83E) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows, the nicest building in Nine Miles.

But the following additional options must have presented themselves as Walker wrote the sentence:

(84F) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows. It is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84G) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows; it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84H) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows: It is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84I) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows--it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84J) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass

windows, it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84K) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows. And it is the nicest building in Nine miles.

(84L) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows; and it is the nicedst building in Nine Miles.

(84M) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows: And it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84N) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows--and it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84O) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows, and it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

(84P) They walk with us up the hill where Bob Marley's body is entombed in a small mausoleum with stained-glass windows and it is the nicest building in Nine Miles.

Good writers have all of these options in mind (Walker chose (84B), a fact that suggests we should instruct students in punctuation opportunities for developing meaning rather than in behavioral opportunities for being right or wrong.

Consider one more sentence with all its options, a sentence by Updike, a conservative punctuator:

(85A) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with

her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn. A heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85B) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn; a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85C) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn: a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85D) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn--a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85E) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn, a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85F) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn. It was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85G) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn; it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are happy.

(85H) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn: It was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85I) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn--it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85J) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with

her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn, it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85K) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn. And it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85L) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn; and it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85M) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn: And it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85N) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn--and it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85O) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn, and it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

(85P) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn and it was a heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

In this example, a conservative punctuator made a not very conservative choice--85A.

When we consider three independent clauses, the options seem endless. In (86) I suggest only a few of the obvious possibilities:

(86A) The cat and our rites are gone. Her life is changed,

but the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86B) The cat and our rites are gone: Her life is changed, but the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86C) The cat and our rites are gone, and her life is changed, but the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86D) The cat and our rites are gone and her life is changed. But the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86E) The cat and our rites are gone and her life is changed, but the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86F) The cat and our rites are gone and her life is changed--but the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

(86G) The cat and our rites are gone--her life is changed. But the memory remains of something powerful playing over me.

Dillard's choice was (86E). Let me run through this once more, suggesting only five choices that surely presented themselves to Mencken:

(87A) It is not sufficient that the thing said in poetry be untrue. It must also be said with a certain grace: It must soothe the ear while it debauches the mind.

(87B) It is not sufficient that the thing said in poetry be

untrue--it must also be said with a certain grace; it must soothe the ear while it debauches the mind.

(87C) It is not sufficient that the thing said in poetry be untrue; it must also be said with a certain grace: It must soothe the ear while it debauches the mind.

(87D) It is not sufficient that the thing said in poetry be untrue. It must also be said with a certain grace; it must soothe the ear while it debauches the mind.

(87E) It is not sufficient that the thing said in poetry be untrue: It must also be said with a certain grace--it must soothe the ear while it debauches the mind.

Clearly punctuation rules, even elaborate ones, cannot prescribe among these options for would-be writers; nor can they describe in any comprehensible way what writers really do. (What rules told Mencken to punctuate as in 87E?) And trying to characterize the problem as a relationship between two clauses is doomed to failure because the punctuation of a third clause frequently affects the punctuation of the others. What is needed is a principle that provides reasons for choosing among the many options.

## 3.0 Judgment Calls

There is always the possibility that people will differ in their judgments, in punctuation as in other matters, so there will be contexts where appeals to reason or taste or

both will fail to lead to agreement. Consider three different ways of handling a rather similar problem. In sequence are sentences by Updike, Mencken, and Forster:

(87) His writing competed with his life--at first, with the need to make a dollar and the wish to have a good time; later, with celebrity, ill health, and the wish to have a good time.

(88) It plumbed, on the one hand, the depths of his sagacity, and on the other hand the depths of his insincerity.

(89) On one side, far below, were vultures, on the other, still farther, lay the world of men.

Example (87) illustrates the hierarchical principle with the higher mark at the major boundary. Example (88) wisely (I think) does not recognize a major boundary at the coordinator because the words that follow are part of a compound object of the verb plumbed . Although a similar situation exists in (88), Updike decided differently, probably because of the overloading with the dash and commas. Example (89) would have been clearer had it recognized a major boundary after vultures , for there is an overloading of commas here too; but Forster, apparently, did not want that degree of separation. (Forster did not fear the comma splice.) Is it a matter of taste? Or, since the sentence would be more clear with a semicolon, is it a matter of audience? Forster wants the sentence to move along; those of us who like the semicolon are more concerned with clarity than rhythm. So which is the more reasonable position? Or are they equally

reasonable?

The following sentence by Waugh clearly--I think--needs a colon:

(90) These recurrent outbursts of enthusiasm for the fashions of bygone periods are due to a very simple cause; the fact that it is a very arduous business to keep up with one's period.

Did Waugh punctuate too hastily? (Prolific he was, yet fastidious too.) Did he sometimes just use semicolons as most of us use colons? (He punctuates similarly elsewhere.)

And Orwell would have done well to overcome his aversion to the comma after introductory elements when he wrote the first sentence in "Marrakech":

(91) As the corpse went past the flies left the restaurant table in a cloud and rushed after it, but they came back a few minutes later.

Finally, consider a sentence by Abbey:

(92) The fringe benefits are priceless: clean air to breathe (after the spring sandstorms); stillness, solitude and space; an unobstructed view every day and night of sun, sky, stars, clouds, mountains, moon, cliffrock and canyons; a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back; the discovesry of something intimate--though impossible to name--in the remote.

The colon points ahead to a series of benefits, each group of them marked by a semicolon (as the hierarchical

scale suggests). But why the parentheses and then, later, the paired dashes? Wouldn't commas in both cases have been simpler and clearer? Or wouldn't a single dash instead of the parentheses been consistent with the paired dashes at the end?

### 3.0 The System Summarized

A punctuation hierarchy indicates, from least to most (with semantic considerations), the degree of separation--or independence--given to an element marked off within an independent clause (pre- or mid- or post-clause) or between two or more independent clauses:

period = maximum separation: I liked Glass. So I stayed.

semicolon = medium separation: I liked Glass; so I stayed.

colon = medium separation (anticipatory): I liked Glass: So I stayed.

dash = medium separation (emphatic): I liked Glass--so I stayed.

comma = minimum separation: I liked Glass, so I stayed.

zero = no separation (i.e., connection): I liked Glass so I stayed.

For pre-clause attachments, a rule permits the use of only zero, comma, dash, or colon:

(94) To the connoisseur a well-told joke is a poem of sorts.... (Epstein)

(95) In my head, punch lines from jokes rattle around quite

comfortably alongside lines of poetry.... (Epstein)

(96) But--we knew thee not, old man. (Abbey)

(97) To illustrate: imagine a lake approximately ten miles long.... (Abbey)

For mid-clause attachments, a second rule permits only pairs of commas or dashes or zero (and parentheses, though not part of the system, may be used optionally instead of paired dashes):

(98) The writing and publishing of books is of course a commercial enterprise, but.... (Epstein)

(99) I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. (Baldwin)

(100) They could forget; and then--in their books--remember. (Woolf)

(101) Barring sociology (which is yet, of course, scarcely a science at all, but rather a moonshine which happens to pay, like play-acting or theology), psychology is the youngest of sciences.... (Mencken)

For post-clause attachments, every mark is possible:

(102) I turn it over meditatively and murmur to myself when no one is looking. (Eiseley)

(103) My bugaboo about trying to explain myself to strangers rose in me, along with my indignation. (Hoagland)

(104) The second stanza always gets a laugh when I read it aloud, but I was not consciously intending to be funny when I wrote it--only exact. (Updike)

(105) And here is a surprise: Uncle Edgar. (Baker)

(106) Somebody knew; perhaps the landowner who grudgingly paid my father three hundred dollars a year for twelve months' labor. (Walker)

(107) We are compatible. From my point of view, friends. (Abbey)

And at this point the reader should be reminded of the many options available in each sentence--the essence and strength of the system. And consideration of the options provided by the hierarchy suggests a principle:

Principle: Punctuate to show the degree and nature of the separation that is desired--the higher the mark the greater the separation.

The principle functions automatically when comma overloading becomes a confusing factor, typically in the case of a series with internal punctuation; thus, at the major boundaries, the expected comma is replaced by a higher mark (semicolon or dash):

(108) Some of these victims are good bookstores, which are gradually being squeezed out by the literary supermarkets such as Kroch's, Waldenbooks, and Dalton's; good books, which too often get lost in the shuffle and drowned out in the din; and readers, whose tastes are not cultivated but confused by the profusion of caviar and sops.... (Epstein)

(109) He advised them to undertake a complete revolution--social, agrarian, and economic--in the Peloponnese.... (Forster)

One principle is elaborated by one other:

Principle: Punctuate only to help achieve syntactic clarity and/or syntactic (rhetorical) effect when relating attached elements to an independent clause and when relating one independent clause to another.

Punctuating for clarity or effectiveness is illustrated by perhaps all sentences in this paper. The need for clarity is most obviously illustrated by punctuation that avoids ambiguity or confusion:

(110) Nothing, she told me, beyond name-calling had marked G's first day at school...." (Baldwin)

Punctuating for syntactic (rhetorical) effectiveness can be illustrated by considering the options that E.B.White had while composing the following simple sentence:

(111A) I will miss cracking the shade at dawn and the first shafts of light in the tinted woods and the old excitement.

(111B) I will miss cracking the shade at dawn, and the first shafts of light in the tinted woods, and the old excitement.

(111C) I will miss cracking the shade at dawn: and the first shafts of light in the tinted woods and the old

excitement.

(111D) I will miss cracking the shade at dawn. And the first shafts of light in the tinted woods. And the old excitement.

(111E) I will miss cracking the shade at dawn--and the first shafts of light in the tinted woods, and the old excitement.

White chose (111E), clearly because it had the effect he desired (not because of a rule or two in a manual of style).

Multiple independent clauses create new environments for punctuation, yet the two principles and two rules are still what guide good writers. Independent clauses have a subject and finite verb, and can therefor be punctuated as orthographic sentences if the writer so chooses. Because of the hierarchy, many options are available for making subtle and important distinctions when relating two independent clauses (two "thoughts"). Here I illustrate with a simple example:

(112) Jane saw a blue heron. She was pleased.

(113) Jane saw a blue heron--she was pleased.

The hierarchy indicates that the so-called "comma splice" is a legitimate option:

(114) Jane saw a blue heron, she was pleased.

With appropriate parallelism, the second clause may be incomplete--that is, the deleted element(s) is fully recoverable by the reader:

(115) Jane saw a blue heron; John a turtle.

(116) Jane saw a blue heron, John a turtle.

With coordinators (and etc.) the options increase because (1) zero is now possible and (2) coordinator plus punctuation has more emphasis than coordinator alone and more meaning than punctuation alone:

(117) A girl came in but she didn't take a seat.

(118) A girl came in, but she didn't take a seat.

(119) A girl came in. But she didn't take a seat.

With coordination connecting independent clauses, an incomplete second clause becomes more frequent and offers additional possibililties:

(120) A girl came in but didn't take a seat.

(121) A girl came in--but didn't take a seat.

Finally, when relating three or more clauses into one orthographic sentence, the options become too numerous for listing here. Some variations on a sentence by White may suffice:

(122A) The sea answers all questions and always in the same way, for when you read in the papers the interminable discussions, bickering, prognostications and turmoil, the disagreements, fateful decisions, agreements, plans, programs, threats and counter threats, then you close your eyes and the sea dispatches one more big roller in the unbroken line since the beginning of the world, and it combs and breaks and returns foaming and saying: "So soon?"

(122B) The sea answers all questions--and always in the same

way. For when you read in the papers the interminable discussions and bickering and prognostications and turmoil, the disagreements and fateful decisions and agreements and plans and programs and threats and counter threats, then you close your eyes and the sea dispatches one more big roller in the unbroken line since the beginning of the world, and it combs and breaks and returns foaming and saying, "So soon?"

(122C) The sea answers all questions and always in the same way: For when you read in the papers the interminable discussions and the bickering and the prognostications and the turmoil, the disagreements, and fateful decisions, and agreements, and plans, and programs--then you close your eyes and the sea dispatches one more big roller in the unbroken line since the beginning of the world, and it combs and breaks and returns foaming and saying, "So soon?"

(122D) The sea answers all questions, and always in the same way; for when you read in the papers the interminable discussions, and the bickering, and the prognostications, and the turmoil, the disagreements, and the fateful decisions, and agreements, and the plans, and the programs, and the threats, and the counter threats--then you close your eyes, and the sea dispatches one more big roller in the unbroken line since the beginning of the world, and it combs and breaks and returns foaming and saying, "So soon?"

(122E) The sea answers all questions, and always in the same way; for when you read in the papers the interminable discussions and the bickering and the prognostications and the turmoil, the disagreements and the fateful decisions and agreements and the plans and the programs and the threats and the counter threats, then you close your eyes and the sea dispatches one more big roller in the unbroken line since the beginning of the world and it combs and breaks and returns foaming and saying, "So soon?"

The variations seem endless. Surely White struggled with some of them before he decided that (120E) best carried his meaning, best achieved the effect that he wanted.

4.0 Conclusion

In American Punctuation (1949), Summey stated in general terms what I have tried to put in specific terms:

> All the marks have rhetorical effects, and all of them do their part in making grammatical relations clear--not for the sake of grammar but for the sake of meaning. They are grammatical because they help to make clear the relations between sentence members, between expressions in series, between a noun and a following descriptive modifier, etc. At the same time they are rhetorical because they are useful for clearness and emphasis. Bad punctuation, of course,

is bad rhetoric. (8)

And on page 10 Summey even discusses the "personal judgment" that writers "must exercise":

> For example, a parenthetical group that interrupts the straight run of a sentence may be enclosed within parentheses, commas, or dashes--of course with different rhetorical effects. A two-member compound sentence with and at the junction may take a comma before the and, or a semicolon, a dash under some circumstances, or sometimes no mark, according to the structure of the sentence and the degree of distinctness the writer wishes to give the members.

Summey's analysis,[9] dating back perhaps half a century, suggests that the theory in this paper is not really new, not really extreme. Yet some who have read this far will argue otherwise; they will argue that an approach like the one proposed here--a "principle" approach as opposed to a "rule" approach--undercuts standards. They will argue that rules (standards) are the basis for effective communication, but it will turn out to be the old argument about "correctness"; and in this, the case of punctuation, it will turn out to be even more oversimplifying than it has been with usage. It isn't rules that writers follow in order to write well--it is principles.[10]

Let me conclude further with some notes on the pedagogical implications of this "principle" approach. The "principle" approach to punctuating implies that, instead of

thinking of punctuation as a matter of right and wrong, we are thinking of it as we think of style--as questions of clarity, appropriateness, effectiveness, and, in each of these, as questions of taste. We express style in our choices among options, and it is certainly a variety of available options that this paper has illustrated. Updike's style is not Forster's, and Abbey's is something else again. Dillard, more than most, exploits the marks for rhetorical purposes--a bit too much for some tastes. Waugh favors the semicolon. (Indeed, the British seem to make more use of the semicolon than do the Americans, in which connection any discussion of the differences between British and American punctuation becomes a discussion of stylistic differences.) I suggest, too, that by considering punctuation a matter of style we can learn something about a writer, about a genre, about a tradition (and about a student too), whereas we learn next to nothing by considering it a matter of right or wrong.

More important, surely, is the approach, the method, and the attitude that punctuation principles offer the writer (and student). With the principle approach, the intent is to create, to shape, to develop (with the rules approach, the intent is to avoid error); the principle approach provides a tool (the rule approach provides a handicap); the principle approach is positive (the rules approach is negative). These differences become evident as the writer, using the principle approach, re-reads what's been written--again and again--to analyze, to consider rhetorical factors (topic, purpose,

audience, context) and thereby to choose as wisely as she or he can. It is, in fact, an approach to composing that is consistent with approaches that emphasize rhetorical strategies and invention and discovery and revision (and the rules approach is like those gimmicky methods that we have abandoned because their formulas and steps and rules fail to capture the complexities of real composing).

With principles we <u>can</u> set standards and form judgments about punctuation, but we must consider punctuation as we do other elements of literary composition: Does the punctuation clarify when it should? Is the punctuation, given its context and purpose, effective?

Finally: (1) Learning to apply right-wrong rules (what they most certainly are in our students' minds) is intimidating whereas learning to apply principles is enabling and (2) the principle approach is easier to learn (most writers, I suggest, have learned simply by reading and writing), for it requires one only to recognize an independent clause when it appears in one's writing (largely an intuitive skill anyway) and to employ two simple principles (largely common sense), both of which are easier to learn than ten or twenty rules that do not always hold even when one grasps the grammar, rules that do not even always help when one grasps the grammar, rules that do not even recognize the numerous punctuation possibilities, rules that do not account for what good writers really do.

## NOTES

1. Meyer, referring to his corpus, states that "the uses of punctuation ...accord (in general) with the rules of punctuation.... While the fictional style contains the majority of violations of rules, these violations were not excessive enough to say that convention is significantly ignored in this style." (111) This conclusion is questionable for at least two reasons. First, the reason for so few violations in Meyer's data is found in the nature of his "learned" and "journalistic" styles (most of the violations are found in the "fictional" style for good reason). The first two of his three styles reflect, more than anything else, the industriousness of copy editors. Second, copy editors religiously follow the very style manuals that Meyer uses as "norms," which means that his conclusion ("violations were not excesive") is too circular to be convincing.
2. See Partridge, chapter 24: "A Chapter on American Punctuation" by John W. Clark.
3. Summey's text consists of journalistic writing (see also note 9); Meyer's consists of journalistic, learned, and

fictional writing (see also note 1).

4. Meyer's study, which claims to describe "American punctuation," is particularly weak in this respect because it does not distinguish between the learned, journalistic, and fictional genres.
5. Examples are surely more abundant in fiction. Joyce's Dubliners is an important illustration of the point, for he painstakingly eschews the comma after introductory elements, a phenomenon worth examining because of the remarkable clarity of the sentences in these stories.
6. Quirk et al. do not use either zero or the dash in their hierarchy; Meyer does not use zero, and he places the semicolon next to the comma. I justify zero and the dash by the fact that both are used by writers--and used in each case to signify difference between it and the other marks. I place the semicolon next to the period because it has some of the sentence-final intonation of the period and it functions more frequently between two independent clauses than between clause and phrase or clause and word.
7. Not very different is the analysis in Sheridan Baker's texts (The Complete Stylist and Handbook, Crowell, 1966, and The Practical Stylist, Harper and Row, 1981) and in The 500 Word Theme, Marks and Kroiter, Prentice-Hall, 1968).
8. Quirk et al. identify eight types of semantic implication for and between clauses, and indeed any good writer finds that some of these implications suggest more of a need for

separation than others do: He bought an Infiniti and he rented a condo and He bought an Infiniti, and he pondered the state of his credit.

9. Summey seems to contradict these observations by supporting the notion that editorial policy, not writers, establish "the standards of usage in punctuation." (13-14) His analysis is weakened further by the nature of his corpus, which consists only of journalistic writing (magazines, newspapers, and such journalists as Walter Lippmann and David Lawrence). For a discussion of such a corpus, see the comments on Meyer's corpus.

10. It is interesting to note that we English teachers, at least in professional publications, do follow the rules (wherever they are applicable); the only exceptions seem to be people like Donald Murray, who was a "real" writer before becoming a teacher.

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